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Collaboration: Critical Key to Downlisting the Stephens' Kangaroo Rat

Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency (RCHCA) alongside Federal and State conservation partners reach monumental milestone together

Riverside, CA – February 17, 2022 – Named after famed American Zoologist Frank Stephens, the Stephens' kangaroo rat (SKR) at first glance may seem inconsequential, but at 2.4 ounces this small but essential animal plays a significant role in maintaining Southern California's ecosystem. Known as a keystone species, their impact on surrounding environments is critical to the survival of others in their ecosystem, which means that if this species were to disappear, no other species would be able to fill its ecological niche.

Similarly, the collaborative and critical nature found in keystone species can also be reflected in various conservation agencies that work to fill important roles to better steward the natural environment. Most recently, collaboration among conservation agencies resulted in the successful downlisting of the SKR from *endangered* to *threatened* – a status that signifies species recovery through excellent land management practices as outlined in regional Habitat Conservation Plans (HCP). As such, the RCHCA SKR HCP identifies the practice of successful land management that reduces, for example, the threat of invasive grasses to minimize the threat of extinction.

However, accomplishing the downlisting of the SKR was not without a history of momentum and collaboration exhibited by RCHCA alongside Federal and State conservation partners over the last three decades. Established in 1991, RCHCA was established as a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) among 10 cities, consisting of: Menifee, Wildomar, Corona, Hemet, Lake Elsinore, Moreno Valley, Murrieta, Riverside, Temecula, Perris and the County of Riverside to manage and conserve open space lands within Western Riverside County. In 1996, the adoption of the SKR HCP was created to conserve 15,000 acres of SKR occupied land. In order to locate 15,000 acres of SKR occupied habitat, RCHCA needed to conserve over 46,000 acres of land, largely in part to protect the endangered SKR. In 2008, RCHCA received concurrence from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) along with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) that their acquisition was completed. Over the following years, RCHCA generated funding assurances for land management and worked to mitigate the future effects of habitat fragmentation by development projects, ensuring regional residential and commercial development could continue unabated by the SKR.

Then in 2019, and under a complimentary partnership with WRCOG, RCHCA completed the most comprehensive SKR Habitat Sustainability Model to streamline management and monitoring moving forward towards full recovery of the species. Finally, in 2020 the SKR Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan was established, a monumental significance towards futureproofing the preservation of this keystone species to the Southern California ecosystem. Joseph Morabito, RCHCA Chair and Mayor Pro Tem for the City of Wildomar proudly states that, " Because of the foresight and planning efforts of those past RCHCA Board

members along with local stakeholders who laid the groundwork, the SKR is no longer in danger of imminent extinction. Our region will continue building on this effort to one day fully recover the species while still ensuring continued certainty for the development of Western Riverside County. This effort demonstrates that HCPs continue to work and protect sensitive species while still providing opportunities for residential and commercial developments.”

Brian Shomo, RCHCA Director and longtime advocate for regional conservation efforts, shared that, “This Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan is the first of its kind for the SKR. Intended to unify the various organizational efforts to protect SKR, the Plan standardizes methods for SKR management and monitoring, evaluates genetic diversity, coordinates resources, and provides a process to assess SKR recovery. The geographic range of SKR spans from Western Riverside County to Northern San Diego County, crossing not only County lines but also multiple reserves under different jurisdictions. This is why the Rangewide Management and Monitoring Plan is such a critical process – it unifies many years of SKR recovery efforts across more than 30 agencies by establishing a consistent management approach based on the needs of the species across its entire range. By combining data from the geographic range, we can confidently show indicators of SKR recovery, namely population dynamics, and reduce threats to SKR populations. Lastly, but equally important, since RCHCA’s transition to WRCOG, we found the supportive resources and agility necessary to accomplish this incredible milestone. The unique partnership and collaborative approach we were able to take with the support of WRCOG was essential in making this happen.”

HCPs serve as a significant framework towards conservation efforts and expediting development while simultaneously protecting the environment. The SKR HCP in particular serves as a blueprint for how collective efforts can make an impact for both public and private benefit. Prior to the SKR HCP, developments in SKR habitat had to navigate the regulatory environment individually. This resulted in significant increases in time and cost required to complete projects, and a patchwork of conserved land. HCPs enable streamlined consultation and a unified management strategy.

“A collaborative effort consisting of the RCHCA, along with State and Federal conservation partners made this milestone possible, furthermore, a sustainable approach to furthering conservation efforts must also identify long term funding solutions whereby all stakeholders are invested in a fiscally responsible manner. Such an approach could provide the critical funding necessary towards furthering collaborative efforts without placing undue burdens or hardships on any one entity. In this fashion, we can ensure that these large reserves are managed for the public benefit and further streamlining of future development projects- a win, win, for all,” stated Lesa Sobek, former Chair of RCHCA Board of Directors and Council Member for the City of Menifee.

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About RCHCA

RCHCA is a joint powers authority consisting of 10 cities and the County of Riverside. RCHCA manages over 46,000 acres of land conserved for the Stephens’ kangaroo rat, which is federally listed as an endangered species. RCHCA was formed in 1991 and is proud to be celebrating the SKR HCP’s 25-year Anniversary. RCHCA has managed conserved lands within southern California, specifically Western Riverside County, since 1996. RCHCA’s mission is to effectively manage conserved and open space lands in Riverside County. RCHCA understands the importance of preserving the region’s plants, animals, and natural communities and especially creating a sense of public appreciation for the environment. RCHCA is administered by Western Riverside Council Of Governments (WRCOG). For more information about RCHCA please visit <http://www.rchca.us/>.

About WRCOG

WRCOG is a joint powers authority, consisting of the County of Riverside, 18 cities, two regional water districts, and the Riverside County Superintendent of Schools. Its actions and activities are guided by its members. Recognizing that issues related to growth are not constrained by city or county boundaries, WRCOG focuses on a number of regional matters important to the future of Western Riverside County. By working together through its committee structure and utilizing existing resources, WRCOG is cost-effective by reducing duplication of effort and sharing information, enabling strong advocacy, and strengthening Western Riverside County's standing in Southern California and the state. WRCOG's program areas are varied and range from transportation to air quality, solid waste, environment, energy, economy, sustainability, and growth. For more information about WRCOG please visit <http://www.wrcog.us/>.